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PERSONS FROM PORLOCK  
VINCENT STARRETT



PERSONS FROM PORLOCK

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PERSONS  
FROM  
PORLOCK

by  
*Vincent Starrett*



*Chicago*  
*The Bookfellows*  
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"PERSONS FROM PORLOCK" appeared first in *Reedy's Mirror* some time in December, 1919. If it is important to anyone to know the exact date he may consult the records and find out; for what other purpose do we maintain records at great inconvenience to ourselves and to the community in general, and employ librarians and other salaried functionaries who first create the records and then interpret them to the public; than to satisfy the demands of this person who is forever wanting to know the exact dates when things happened? Suffice it to say that the appearance of this essay was greeted with acclaim; children shouted, "It is so!" and newspaper men in Ardmore, Oklahoma (where the *Mirror* is understood to have had an enormous paid circulation) exclaimed, "Selah!" and registered complete accord. Readers far and wide joined in the verdict that at last the whole, irrefragible and incontestible truth had been told about the matter.

But the far-reaching effects of this *tour de force* were by no means confined to the subscription list of the *Mirror*. The people at home here, where there was only one copy of the *Mirror* extant and that not free from question as to its paidness, went around talking Por-

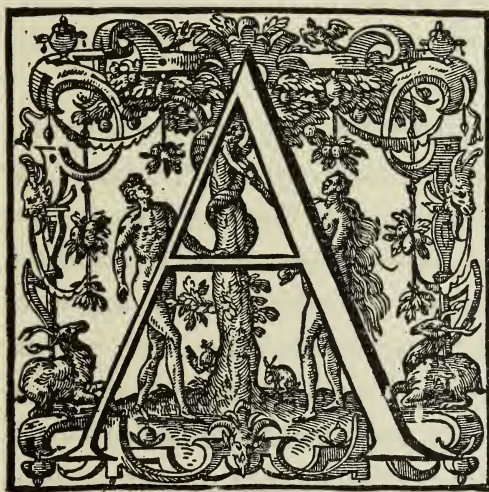
lock for several days. Eric Dixon made frequent references to it, and Frances Donovan was reminded of Persons from Porlock whenever the doorbell rang. Without exaggeration, it may be said to have modified the lives of several families for a number of days.

An essay so latent with inherent power obviously should be published in a limited first edition by THE BOOKFELLOWS; three hundred copies on French hand made paper, each copy signed by the author, would not be inappropriate. And that, dear reader, with your kind permission, is exactly what has happened.

Done in the ancient city of Chicago in the month of September, 1923.

— GEORGE STEELE SEYMOUR





T THIS moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above

an hour. . . . ”

That person from Porlock!

There is no further record of him, I believe; no clew to the business he was about, of such importance that it detained “above an hour” the poet upon whose table lay the interrupted manuscript of “Kubla Khan.” He lives for a moment in Coleridge’s note to the first edition of the poem, then passes from history. Doubtless he went back to Porlock, where, it is conceivable, his

descendants still live, and occasionally perhaps, still interrupt the labors of others. On business, no doubt! Always on business!

In heaven's name, just what business is Porlock celebrated for? There is no atlas handy, or I would look it up.

And what earthly business could he have had with Coleridge? — this — this — “person!” In England, and more so in that day than in this, the distinction between a person and a gentleman is rather marked. Coleridge would not have written down the one for the other. We may be assured that it was “business” indeed; and probably a very low and sordid transaction — not, however, furtive. Perhaps the matter of a bill — trifling enough, no doubt, but of supreme importance to the person from Porlock; even to Coleridge, it may be. . . . I hope he had the money! I am convinced that this business involved money, for it detained him “above an hour.” Was not the poet's first word sufficient, that he could not pay that day? But no! The person from Porlock would want his money. It is characteristic of persons from Porlock. What to him was the fact that, in the embarrassment of

his demands, "Kubla Khan" was fading from the brain that had dreamed it?

I may be quite wrong about this. I hope I am. But it is certain that however important the business of the man from Porlock, it was insignificant beside the necessity for finishing "Kubla Khan."

Would that we had this person's name. We would niche him forever with the outcasts — embalm him, a fly in amber, for the revilement of all posterity.

Poor Coleridge! Immortāl somnambulist! Luckless dreamer! That person from Porlock seemed always to stand between him and completed work. Nearly all his writings are fragmentary — incomplete. Some other person or thing, when it was not the Porlock nuisance, transpired to interrupt his performance. I fancy he grew to dread a knock upon the door, shut away in the shelter of his own imaginings; heard that devil's tattoo upon his panels when, perhaps, no knock had been given. . . . Jean Paul wrote eloquently to the din of kitchen utensils, with the amiable chatter of his family about him, and the doves flying in and out of the kitchen

door. Imagine Coleridge doing *that*. Imagine Carlyle!

Persons from Porlock. . . . They are at every turn of the crooked road, at every bend of the stream. Life is congested with them; they fill the world with their meaningless, unmeaning, well-meant chatter. From their "business" nobody is exempt, nothing is sacred. They are numbered in the millions; and of their number are our friends and the members of our family.

Business is their excuse and their fetish. Now business, of course, is important — is it not? Business — important. The one word is significant of the other. Obviously, if business is unimportant it is not business; if it is business, it is not unimportant. And — dear me! — if it is neither business nor important, then it is nothing. Nothing is that which without which nothing is not. I do not know how this strikes *you*; to me it seems rather incoherent. To the person from Porlock it is all as simple as A, B, C, for it is his argument that I am trying to get at. I imagine Coleridge found it trying enough; no wonder he was detained "above an hour." Importance, it is true, is a relative term. There is important

business, and more important business, and very important business, and so on; but it is an inflexible rule that the business immediately in hand is quite the *most* important business in the world, at the moment, to the person from Porlock. It is a truth easily demonstrated. The man will tell you so himself, with the utmost candor, and with an incredulous stare at your stupidity. You say, for instance:

“Really, old man, I haven’t a moment to spare. I’m just in the middle of ‘Kubla Khan,’ a very curious poem I dreamed last night. I want to get it down before I forget it.”

And the person from Porlock looks at you as if you were quite the strangest thing he had seen all day, and replies:

“I’m sorry, Mr. Coleridge, but this bill must be paid. It’s been running now since June, and this is the third time I’ve called to collect it.”

And you answer him:

“But, don’t you understand? I’ll *forget* this, if I don’t get it down on paper, right away. It’s a *dream* — don’t you understand?”

It is perfectly apparent that he does not understand. If he is inclined to be rude, he will say:



"I don't know anything about your dreams, and I care less. What I'm interested in is my money. I won't forget that, at any rate. Do I get it, or don't I?"

And this goes on for "above an hour," because, being capable of dreaming "Kubla Khan," you are incapable of throwing this person downstairs; which, of course, is what he richly deserves. Whether he gets his money, depends largely on whether you have it to give him. Actually, he is less menacing than he appears. He may even have a sneaking sympathy for you; and all the way back to Porlock he mutters comment relative to your sanity.

Or, perhaps you are in the middle of the dream itself; stretched easily in the wicker rocker, smoking. The telephone rings. You ignore it. It continues to ring. In the end, you say "Damn!" forcibly (I hope *you* do!), and answer it, although you are entirely certain all the time who is at the other end of the disturbance. And you are right; it is the person from Porlock. He inquires pleasantly whether you can rush him out an article on bee-hives, and bring it to the office in the morning. He would not bother you, but it is

late in the month and he is up to his ears, it seems, in "business." If you are the right sort, you will say immediately that it is impossible; that your wife has just died unaccountably, and the children all have scarlet fever. That is what you will say, will you not? On the contrary, that is what you will wish you had said, after you have hung up the receiver. Actually, you will think desperately for the space of perhaps one second, and then agree to write the article. Meanwhile, of course, the dream has vanished completely. It will never return; not *that* dream.

I knew a man once who *married* a person from Porlock! He was a writing man, too, although a number of city blocks behind the author of "Kubla Khan." It occurred to him that interruptions to his work were planned with consummate timeliness by one of his evil spirits. At first, he thought the episode might be accidental, and for a time he believed the repetition of the episode might be charged to coincidence; after a while it dawned upon him that, whether malicious or not, it was chronic. He observed that always at the moment when the flame of his genius was burning most brightly, or when a long-de-

sired phrase was hurrying to his mind to be captured, his wife would burst dramatically into the room to inquire what had become of last evening's newspaper, or whether he would mind answering the doorbell if it should ring, because she was going to lie down, or why he had not told her he had received a letter from Robert Southey saying that the baby was ill.

Whenever my wife — whenever my friend's wife — thus interrupted his writing, he became choked with a blind fury, and replied that he had buried the kitten in the desired newspaper, or that the bell might ring until the battery was exhausted, or that he sincerely hoped the baby would die. All of which was not good for my friend's temper, and often spoiled his style. He realized that his wife was a charming person, pleasant to look at, and nice to have around the house; but he fervently wished she were not so desperately interested in affairs at Porlock. And, of course, he did not really wish that Robert Southey's baby would die, while the kitten, at the moment, was in his pocket — not at all dead, nor even moribund. It is likely enough that he was sincere in the matter of the doorbell.



Persons from Porlock, naturally, are not all amiable; although most of them, no doubt, are well-meaning. That perhaps is the worst of the whole matter. If their intentions were deliberately malicious, an end to their pernicious activities might well be accomplished with the nearest object to hand — a thick walking-stick, or a flower-pot, — and Porlock (enormous as that city is) shortly would be depopulated. Often, however, the person is one who should know better; one who himself would be the first to groan when the knocker resounded through the house. Having finished setting down his own dream of Xanadu, without interruption, blandly he descends upon his friend to read it aloud. He looks about him at the littered desk, at his friend's haggard countenance, at his friend's ink-smeared elbows, and hopes he does not interrupt. . . . And a golden afternoon is torn from the calendar with ruthless hand, and "Kubla Khan" remains unfinished where it was dropped, until another afternoon, when, as like as not, it is forgotten.

Good chap! He is the least offensive of them all — but he is from Porlock!

The place has no frontiers; it is as wide as the

universe. Its geographical boundaries are the boundaries of the world; its history is the history of Time. Porlock-on-the-Hudson, Porlock-on-the-Thames, Porlock-on-Avon. . . . How many times do you suppose Anne was obliged to call Master Will to his dinner? . . . Porlock-on-the-Styx. . . .

Ah, that person from Porlock-on-the-Styx!

How many "Kubla Khans" has he interrupted with his sudden knock! With him there is no argument; no payment will insure his departure. . . . When he leaves we accompany him to and beyond the threshold. St. Ives must wait the magic of another hand to lead him from his difficulties; on the littered desk, unfinished, lie our Kubla Khans, our Edwin Droods, our Ivory Towers. . . .

In kindness perhaps he comes, the last and most formidable of his caravan. His business brooks no delay. By him indeed are we detained "above an hour."

*Wm. S. Stannard*



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